Mr. Emerson's misdirections of thought and influence

Emerson as Alchemist

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IN RALPH WALDO EMERSON one finds a gathering of many ideas rising with the Renaissance, ideas descending to us by various routes: through Puritan thought to emerge in New England spiritual concerns; through intellectual, social, political movements on the continent to impinge upon the American popular spirit, particularly in the decades just preceding Emerson. Those ideas come to a spiraling crisis in the popular spirit of our own day. Our disoriented, popular spirit is shocked to be told, as Alexsandr Solzhenitsyn did at Harvard in 1978, that its own wandering from reality is but a parallel aberration to that waywardness we in the West have been pleased to castigate in the intellectual, social, political evolvement of the Russian state:

> Karl Marx was able to say in 1844 that "Communism is naturalized humanism". . . . One does see the same stones in the foundations of a despiritualized humanism and of any type of socialism: endless materialism; freedom from religion and religious responsibility. . .; concentration on social structures, with a seemingly scientific approach. . . . At first glance it seems an ugly parallel: common traits in the thinking and the way of life of today's West and today's East. . . .

At first glance it may seem shockingly untenable to suggest that Emerson is a major contributor to that common secular position held by both West and East. We in America study him, superficially, as the central light of the "Transcendental" movement, a word about which still lingers something suggestive of transcendence. Yet Emerson is a notable carrier and disseminator of that very "naturalized humanism" upon which Marx builds his own edifice at the same moment of history that Emerson is building "Transcendentalism" to a respectability on this side of the Atlantic. The base in Emerson appears more spiritual than does Marx's. But its fundamental presumption is that man is divine, a divinity not to be referred at last to any source outside his own ambiguous being. In Emerson, the presumption of man's divinity becomes most particularly focused in the growing intellectual community at the same time the same presumption is becoming tacitly fundamental to state policy in our own country, through such fathers of our founding

as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and even Thomas Jefferson, in all of whom there is a dominant faith in man's unaided reason. It is a presumption that indeed will become generally dominant in the second half of the nineteenth century, finding such complementary support in Emersonian ideas as to elevate him as statesman of the intellect, the founding father of the new "American Scholar."

Emerson's neighbor Nathaniel Hawthorne sees in the Sage of Concord an image of the rising New Man who has since then come to dominate our world; he reacts sharply to neighbor Emerson, the spokesman for a modernist thought that Hawthorne, as prophetic poet, opposes. We shall find Emerson, if we look at him with Hawthorne's eyes, a locus in whom is collected and from whom disseminated more widely than we credit those floating spores of Enlightenment thought which we yet daily breathe to our continuing discomfort. Emerson's is part of a pervasive thought analyzed for us in its historical roots and current effects by such thinkers as Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, Gerhart Niemeyer, and many others. They show that thought to be destructive of individual and community health and order. Emerson as carrier, then, should be far more disturbing to us than he has been. But largely because of his honored position in the American academy, one is advised not to look too deeply into his rhetorial optimism, especially as one values any credentials as intellectual liberal in an enlightened century. Thus Emerson has been able to influence not only our letters but also our institutions more deeply than the serene, benign surface of his prose has allowed us to see. For his prose has commanded a generous deference lest the critic appear unmannerly, if not obtuse. One might as well wield ax handles as criticize Emerson.

Hawthorne was certainly much disturbed by the seeping captivity of spirit that is Emersonian thought. He did not attempt to oppose it at the level of philosophical discourse, except insofar as one might take satirical parable to be such, as in the "Celestial Railroad," a commentary on Transcendental ideas. More effectively, he presents the consequences of Emersonian thought in the grotesque figures of his best fiction. Though Hawthorne himself is not so strong in his commitment to the Church as he longs to be, he sees that in Emerson the sacramental symbols have become incommensurate to any anchor of symbol in the realities of being. Emerson for his part cannot believe that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ are spiritually relevant "facts," facts being the principal object of Emerson's worship largely because he confuses the intellect's perception of fact with the creation of fact. While denying man as fallen in the orthodox sense of that doctrine, Emerson would rescue man according to his own plan of salvation. The "divine," about which he speaks so often, is the human intensified by a rhetoric that intends to appeal to "common sense": the reasonable is a sign of man as divine. The power which Emerson sees governing all form, and to which he would give the title of divinity, again and again turns out to be the action of his own thought as it enunciates his version of order through his rhetorical artistry. As creator through words, he makes the only acceptable world. The ancient problems of good and evil are but "shadows" of man's thought. That reduction is pursued with confidence in "Self-Reliance" (1832-41): "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind."

Yet curiously for a reasonable mind, that integrity is to be realized through one's following impulses of the soul, the sure avenue to beatitude for Emerson. For, as he says in his "Doctrine of the Soul" (1838), a man "is but the facade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide" if a man but "gives up [*i.e.*, surrenders] to his soul and suffers it to publish itself through all his words and actions. He and he alone is great who apprehends and obeys this truth." We are told in "Self-Reliance" that "Spontaneity or Instinct" is "the essence of genius, the essence of virtue, the essence of life." It is the "primary wisdom" which we denote as "Intuition." One seems

predestined to follow Impulse, Instinct, Spontaneity—terms vaguely synonymous in Emerson's essays—since "no man can violate his nature." And thus Emerson transfers Calvinistic election from the province of God to that of Nature, a step toward that pallid paganism he champions as Unitarianism, in which man only is divine.

Nevertheless, one's own "nature" seems less than absolute to Emerson, except through rhetorical elevations such as the assertion to the Harvard scholars that "The world is nothing, the man is all." In this aphorism he means the present tense verb in its temporal measure. He means precisely *now*, at the moment he speaks, that the "world is nothing, the man is all." Otherwise, all is lost. For "Spontaneity" he fears may waver before awesome *history*, the devil-term Emerson struggles to exorcise. Under the term *history* he arraigns ideas counter to his own, as for instance the Divinity of Christ. It seems imperative to Emerson to reduce any possible cause other than the mind's own action—which is always in a present moment—and in the interest of that necessity he insists repeatedly that the only possible moment of reality is the present moment of awareness in the individual mind. Thus reality and awareness become fused and confused. Without realizing he does so, he anchors awareness beyond his powers of rescue in time: awareness is circumscribed and caged by time present, past, and future. In this entrapment, he nevertheless is obligated to a continuous, though only partial, renunciation of time: he focuses upon time past, upon the history of awareness. The past moment of what he calls condescendingly the "sacredness of tradition" is rejected, primarily because it engages a gathering—a community of mind—broader than the consciousness of the individual in the present moment. But he discovers himself at last entrapped by this maneuver, since next he must renounce as well the present moment of consciousness in the elected individual, most particularly in himself. For the individual, alas, bears in him past moments that haunt him. And thus his famous pronouncement that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." That statement in context, in spite of the intended saving words *foolish* and *little*, indicts consistency as a principle whereby one steps out of a past moment into a present and thence toward a future, at each stage maintaining a balance and orientation by the guidance of the trailing foot. For to move at all from a present moment is to make that moment a past, weighting consciousness inescapably with a sense of the past. There is no way for honest awareness to escape the drag of its own past; but that drag is also a steadying friction to awareness.

What Emerson attempts as solution is a kangaroo hopping, a thrusting away from the present with both feet as it were. What we leap into "with both feet," however, we begin to suspect. Emerson's scorning a "foolish consistency" follows immediately upon his having insisted that one must trust "emotion" above all else. He asks rhetorically: "Why drag about this monstrous corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place?" Aside from his obvious realization that he contradicts himself in "public places," a matter of some embarrassment we may suspect from his tone, something deeper is at issue. Only the present moment from which we are to leap is sacred, but it is sacred only insofar as it is a sacrifice made upon the altar of Progress by Emotion, Instinct, Impulse, Intuition, or whatever god-priest term suits the argument of the moment. In his little book *Nature* (1836) he castigates the popular spirit of his own day as "retrospective," since it foolishly "builds sepulchres of the fathers. . . . Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not a history of theirs? . . . why should we grope among the dry bones of the past. . .?"

For Emerson, this line of argument rather certainly means that one must reject any sense of the sacred not immediately an-

chored in a present moment of consciousness. Yet insofar as the present moment itself is sacred, its holiness is a reflection of consciousness caught in the act of abandoning the world of time; but the abandonment is in the interest of the next moment, not in the interest of any transcendent. Even the phenomena that give the moment any locus are very nearly declared phantasmagoria, an effect of that magic lantern of awareness itself, to which he is reluctant to grant any other being than itself as cause. The individual consciousness is elevated over all else, that "all else" being declared by contrast only the "shadow" of being. By casting such a magic lantern on a screen, as T.S. Eliot's Prufrock half wishes possible, Emerson justifies unlimited progress—an infinity of becoming—to the individual consciousness, never troubling with the question of where that screen comes from upon which he casts his shadows. Emerson tells the Harvard Divinity students (1838) that Christianity can only be "true Christianity" through "a faith . . . in the infinitude of man." It is therefore wrong, he continues, indeed it is a "perversion, that the divine nature is attributed to one or two persons, and denied all the rest." In his program for the rest of mankind, for everyman, according to Emerson, each consciousness may by its own action overcome time past—in short, transcend history. To the contrary, those fathers to whom we build sepulchres (against Emerson's advice) contend that history was transformed once and for all time by mediation, pointing to the historical moment of the Incarnation. This belief in a particular moment of intercession is our one inheritance which Emerson is most resolute in rejecting. One detects, in his phrase "one or two persons," a deliberate slyness, since it is abundantly clear from the rest of the "Divinity School Address" that his principal object is to undermine the divinity of Jesus, not that of "one or two persons." That is, the Divinity of Christ is resolutely under attack. He retains the term Christianity but redefines it, an intellectual deceit as old as the Sophists and as contemporary as Doublespeak.

We note the crucial difficulty in Emerson's resting his faith in the present moment of consciousness: that moment continuously gives way to a new present. As with any millennial faith, therefore, the restlessness must be assuaged by focusing consciousness toward an always future moment. The present must be sacrificed, as the past is rejected. The only apotheosis is that of consciousness itself, promised to occur at the very next moment. That promise failing, some elaborate Five Year Plan may evolve. In repose, in contemplation, in reflection, in meditation, consciousness dies to itself, falls mortal out of its own godhead. And so Emerson actively opposes those arresting occupations of the mind. Put less kindly, consciousness fails in its moment-hopping which has given it the illusion of having transcended time, of having walked boldly upon the waters of the world—if it once allows itself any focus of attention not aimed strictly at a future moment of consciousness. Hence Emerson's insistent point that "Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state. . . [Thus] the soul becomes." That action of becoming, he adds, forever "degrades the past . . . shoves Jesus and Judas equally aside." In another essay contemporary to these words from the "Divinity School Address"—in his "Doctrine of the Soul"—we discover what is at issue: "Our life is indeed nothing but an endless procession of facts or events like the pulsations of the heart or the beats of the pendulum." (Shades of Edgar Allen Poe's *Eureka*.) When one conceives life as such and commits oneself to it, one can then conclude, in Emerson's words, that "a fact is an Epiphany of God." Fact removes one far from those "sepulchres of the fathers"; indeed, fact is the very pogo stick most helpful to moment-hopping, the process whereby one becomes the Emersonian New Man.

Emerson declares with Old Testament authority about this New Man: "on every fact of his life [man] should rear a temple of wonder and joy." We observe here how easily the New Man, who is the active agent of fact because he calls fact into an ex-

istence out of nature, is deified by his creative extraction. It is, of course, rather an act of de-construction, of de-creation, when not governed by a piety toward the Father of all facts. For Emerson's fact depends on existence *a priori*, existence of both consciousness and its object, despite his pretense to the contrary, even as that projected phantasmagoria from the magic lantern of consciousness depends upon some prior screen for its projections. But in the climate of such thought about being as Emerson provides—about man's own creative act of becoming through an Annuciation of the Self to the buried self—Emerson can assure the American scholar that "in proportion as a man has anything in him divine, the firmament flows before him, and takes his signet and form. He is great who can alter my state of mind . . . The great man makes the great thing." Once more we arrive at the conclusion that only that which the New Man makes can be considered sacred.

But we arrive as well at a more chilling presence in Emerson's cheerful message to the New Man he would call into existence. Some men are greater than others in Emerson's argument, by virtue of their intellect, and the question becomes: what should be the lesser man's relation to the greater? In a famous passage in "Self-Reliance" he asserts that "He who knows that power is in the soul, that he is weak only because he has looked for good out of him and elsewhere, and so perceiving, throws himself unhesitatingly on his thought, instantly rights himself, stands in the erect position, commands his limbs, works miracles. . . ." The arena in which he works those miracles is one inhabited by the lesser souls as well. For the New Man, however, "the stern ambition to be the Self of the nation and the nature" leads him to "cast behind [him] all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity. Be to them a man." The term *man* here means at least *superman*, but more nearly means *emmanuel*—god-with-us. What, then, should be the response of lesser souls to his New Man, Emerson's Third Adam? As he puts the answer in conjuring the "American Scholar": The "poor" and the "low" among us "are content to be brushed like flies from the path of the great person, so that justice shall be done by him to that common nature which it is the dearest desire of all to see enlarged and glorified. . . . They [that is, the "poor" and "low"] cast the dignity of man from their downtrod selves upon the shoulders of a hero, and will perish to add one drop of blood to make the great heart beat, those giant sinews combat and conquer. He lives for us, and we live in him." Emerson's prepositions give him away here: the shift from *for* to *in* obliterates the lesser souls. What he gives us is a perversion of the central point of Christianity: Christ dies for us that we may live in Him. Emerson's New Man lives for us, so long as we die in him.

But, then, who is such a great man as Emerson praises? That is, whose is to be the dominant consciousness through which the lesser are to be absorbed into a millennial future moment? One cannot read Emerson for long without concluding that he understands one such great man to be the very prophet of greatness who speaks these revelations, Ralph Waldo Emerson.[1] For, though he makes rhetorical show of sharing his personal sacredness with others and insisting upon that sacredness as universal in man—a presence in each man of the Great or Over-Soul—the central point of validity for him lies in his own self-awareness. The terms *our* and *we* occur as gestures of inclusiveness of lesser souls by analogy, as in our last quotation from him. But they occur at the penultimate level of his arguments. At the ultimate level, the first person singular becomes the dominant focus. In consequence, even where one encounters the first person plural in his arguments, the word rings with the authority of the Royal We, and often with a hint of condescension.

Emerson's position is sufficiently radical to have raised serious objections, as witness his thirty-year ostracism from Harvard after his "Divinity School Address." It is not until that activist of Emersonian ideas, Charles W. Eliot, becomes president at

Harvard in 1869 that Emerson becomes safely established as patron intellect of our national spirit. But in the 1830s, Emerson reports a friend's obvious question about those magic words such as Instinct and Intuition upon which his whole argument is made to turn: what if those bubblings in the individual's soul be "from below, not from above?" That is, what if Impulse is an evil prompting of the soul out of a base nature in the soul? Emerson's confident answer was, by his own report: " 'They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the devil's child, I will live then from the devil.' No law can be sacred to me but the law of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it." This is the central point of departure in "Self-Reliance," as it is literally the central assurance made to a budding intelligentsia in "The American Scholar." Of that scholar, Emerson confidently asserts that "He and he alone knows the world"—if he follows Emerson's program of becoming. He does so because he has "experienced" life and has developed his mind from the premise that "In self-trust, all the virtues are comprehended." That self-virtuous knowledge of the world is certified by the power of thought, exercised through the instruments of fact.

For Emerson, "fact" and not will is the fulcrum of thought's power over nature and over other men, a crucial distinction. Or one might say that for him fact is the grain upon which thought exercises its divinely formative power to build that little pearl, the Self, within whose opaqueness thought catches glimpses of its own wavering reflection. Evil is but thought gone astray from fact, not to be corrected by the will but by a reforming fact. But *grain* here is too concrete an image, since fact is nature purified to airy thinness by its abstraction from nature. For Emerson, that rarefying action itself is nature's own salvation. The sum of his address to nature and man is that power is generated by applying a saving form—form itself being an effect of the action of the individual intellect upon nature and man with the instrument of fact, that invisible laser. Emerson then elevates and obscures intellect by calling it *the soul*, an emphatic phrase in his use of it. His emphasized phrase (*the soul*), through the article *the* (rather than *my* or *your*), tends to suggest a separation of the term *soul* from any discreet or particular anchor in the individual man and to associate it in an ambiguity of universalism with the term *Over-Soul*. In his lecture called "The School" (1838), he argues that "between [facts seized from nature] as a confounding, distracting force and the Unity of the Soul our being is suspended." When our "being" is forceful, it is so as a movement of thought from fact to fact, each hop dominating fact to the service of the ambiguous Soul. Indeed, that is the action required by Emerson for self-deification: his version of divinity is the act of conscious power over both nature and other souls.

We suggested above that Emerson is cautious about the problem of man's will. The old concept of the will is a very dangerous one to introduce into any argument that would justify the dominance of a particular soul over creation. (Patrons of that argument as various as Machiavelli and Nietzsche are acutely aware of the point.) It is a particularly dangerous concept in a climate in which men are still heavily concerned with man's fall from grace through willfulness, as Emerson's New England audience still was. Emerson's down-playing of the will, one suspects, is a strategic necessity from his point of view, for man's will yet has a bad reputation, at least residually, in the popular mind he wishes to turn to a support of his new version of man. Therefore, he makes the will an insignificant presence in relation to the soul. In his "Doctrine of the Soul" he asks: "What am I? What has my will done to make me that I am? Nothing. I have been floated into this thought, this hour, this connexion of event by might and mind sublime, and my little ingenuities and willfulness have not thwarted, have not aided to an appreciable degree. . . . the whole tendency of our time is in the sub-

mission it enjoins to the Unconscious and Infinite."

Thus Emerson manipulates a substitution of the Soul as the deterministic force, self-revealed, in place of the will as the crucial agent in man's power over nature and man, rather firmly rejecting the will—that potentially perverse antagonist of being. He is pre-Darwinian evolutionist, preaching the inevitability of "becoming" through "the Unconscious and Infinite." In his ambiguous conception of Soul and Over-Soul and of their relation, one hears a prelude already to Bergson's *élan vital*; one discovers that "Self-Reliance" is an act of creative power to which is denied the errors that willfulness allows as possible in those actions.[2] Emerson, by associating our "becoming"—our having been "floated into this thought, this hour"—with an imminent pervasive Soul, trades upon the general connotation of such god-terms as *Soul* with such self-flattery that pride stirs in our becoming. At the same time, we are provided an escape from "creative" responsibility. For we have the subtle passive voice whose agency is buried: we are "floated into this thought." That thought is ours, though we have been brought to it "by some other force," as flotsam floats on the indefinite tide. We *have* thought, but are (in the final analysis) not responsible for our thought when language is so used.

Now our submission to the "Unconscious and Infinite" by a surrender to "Instinct" or "Intuition" is an act of "introversion" which Emerson praises in "The American Scholar"; by that action we seem to ennoble our self-elevation into a discreet (*i.e.*, finite) Godhead, to which Emerson quite carefully denies finitude. Thus do we arrive at Emerson's version of the Superman. Individually, one becomes the deity of his own becoming, though ostensibly subservient to the larger "Over-Soul." That "Over-Soul" itself exists at last through the authority of one's own consciousness. With such confusions of thought, one may at once be as humble as Saint Francis (since man is discreet manifestation of a larger Soul) and as prideful as Lucifer (since man makes his own Soul and thereby even justifies the Over-Soul). But one may be so self-pleased only when freed of the confounding presence of incisive thought, in whose distorted name Emerson performs his alchemy of the New Man. (Just how readily Instinct or Intuition becomes confused, for instance, might give comic delight could we but bring Emerson into prolonged conversation with D.H. Lawrence, a comedy which would cry out at last for the return of incisive thought.)

One must by this point of our survey of Emerson's thought be arrested by the Faustian elevation of the soul's power over being, especially as revealed in those essays and lectures of the 1830s and 1840s. In him we detect thought in its Enlightenment liberation, however much obscured in its rationalist origins by Emerson's camouflage of Swedenborgian ideas about "correspondences." (The controlling metaphor for Emerson's correspondences, unlike Baudelaire's borrowings from Swedenborg, centers in the Over-Soul as posed against nature, giving rise to an intolerable dualism.) We see, in fact, the secular gnostic's lever established by Emerson, and he will be throwing his weight upon it henceforth to shift the world to a site more to his liking. Having separated the individual soul from the rest of existence in his *Nature* (1836), he insists upon the soul's supreme authority. It is the ME, he says, and all the "NOT ME" constitutes that "apparition" (his word) we call nature, including "all other men and my own body." Under an epigraph from Plotinus, which is congenial to residual Puritan thought about nature's relation to the soul no less than to his own purposes, Emerson performs the surgery. The anesthetic to incisive thought is ambiguity of terms.

The Plotinian soul has of old been compatible to Puritan transcendental thought. But what a Jonathan Edwards understands and what Emerson makes of the soul in nature in the light of Plotinus are quite different. The Plotinian epigraph Emerson uses we may take as example: "Nature is but an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul; nature being a thing

which doth only do, but not know." For Edwards, this is to say that (in his words) the "beauty of the world consists wholly of sweet mutual consents, whether within itself or with the Supreme Being." That beauty rests in "resemblance of spiritual beauties" since nature's discreet bodies are but "the shadows of beings," with both the shadows and the reality lying under the providence of that Supreme Being. Nature for Edwards, as for Emerson, is emblematic. But for Edwards it is emblematic of God, not of man's particular soul floated into its own thought as Emerson would have it. Emerson assures us in "Self-Reliance" that "Who has more soul than I, masters me, though he should not raise his finger." (One hears in Emerson's *more* the American hallmark, "Bigger is better.") In that same drift of thought he exhorts the budding intellectual a-borning in the new world, the "American Scholar": if that scholar would be among "the kings of this world" he must give "the color of [his] present thought to all nature and all art," since he alone "knows the world." And what will that scholar know? Emerson is quite emphatic in his answer: "The world is nothing, the man is all."

The man explicitly named here by Emerson, with capital letters, is "Man Thinking." It is the gnostic self, deified through a concentration of power in the self accomplished by the conquest and ordering of fact. We must notice here an emphasis upon a new Emersonian discovery, already implied and now made explicit: that of the all-important "single person." In celebration of that discovery, he insists that "Everything that tends to insulate the individual,—to surround him with barriers of natural respect, so that each man shall feel the world is his, and man shall treat with man as a sovereign state with a sovereign state;—tends to true union as well as greatness." What is accomplished by such separation, however, is the elevation of the "single person" over our old sense of community in its dual aspect: community in the body of mankind which theologians speak of as the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant. "[I]f the single man," says Emerson, "plant himself indomitably on his instincts [by using the power to be commanded through possession of fact], and there abide, the huge world will come round to him." The same point is expressed in "Self-Reliance": "It is only as a man puts off from himself all external support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail." Through the energy of such action he is "made the Providence to himself, dispensing good to his goodness, and evil to his sins"—or so he advises the Divinity School students. The argument is terrifying in its extensions, in its hunger for the individual mind's power over other men and over nature; in it, inescapably, is a totalitarian spirit loosed in the genial, pious Emersonian tone. We must note a concomitant poisoning, remembering what Emerson has already advised the lesser souls to do in support of "Man-Thinking," to surrender their manhood to the superman. In this insistence upon alienation as the road to transcendent power, the insistence upon the "single person," Emerson also helps atomize community so that the individual becomes a unit free to manipulate if strong enough to do so, but persuaded to surrender to manipulation if not. In surrender, one becomes a unit in the machinery of being under construction. One becomes "specialized." It is no accident in the history of the American Academy, then, that when President Charles W. Eliot sets forth his new plans for a new Harvard in his inaugural address in 1869—smorgasbord curricula—Emerson is a mainstay in his allusions. Eliot argues for programs of specialized training as the highest possible contribution by the new academy, the ends of such specialization to be a service of the state. (Ironically, private education becomes public in the extension of Eliot's system.) Emerson had been in exile for thirty years, but he returns in power through Eliot to become the glory of the American Scholar.

One will have discovered, from my tone if not from my argument, that I do not approve of Emerson's thought nor of the in-

fluence he has had upon the American mind. I do not because, in consequence of his accepted position, there occurs the series of separations which Flannery O'Connor sees as symptoms of modern Manicheanism: nature is separated from grace, reason from imagination, and judgment from vision. It is the modernist separation in Emerson that leads the late Randall Stewart to regret Emerson's considerable influence: "[Emerson's] doctrine is radically anti-Christian, and has done more than any other doctrine to undermine Christian belief in America." Of course Emerson shares doctrine with a numerous body whose name is legion. We need not conclude his influence absolute to see it as both considerable and deleterious, as well as continuous in the present popular mind. A recent *Time* magazine "Essay" by Lance Morrow is devoted to Emerson as the "wonder-rabbi of Concord, Mass., our bishop, the mystic of our possibilities."[3] The anti-Christian effect of Emersonian thought is ironic in such borrowed metaphor as Morrow's. For very deliberately and consistently, Emerson rejects any mediator—rabbi or priest—between the self and existence. He insists that Christ is but teacher and prophet, one who must give way to the new teacher and prophet of the moment, most conspicuously himself. For "The old is for slaves." Prayer is false because it "looks abroad and asks for some foreign addition to come through some foreign virtue, and loses itself in endless mazes of natural and supernatural, and mediatorial and miraculous." Little wonder the Harvard Divinity establishment reacted adversely.

Given such insistence upon an absolute aloneness, Emerson is forced at last to conclude that separate "souls" can never communicate significantly; each soul is irremediably isolated, by "nature" and by its own act of separation. The accompanying necessity is that each soul must become the whole of the world, one's success in becoming such a whole determines one's effect on others. Power controlled by the self affects any lesser soul, so that one can conclude, as if a revelation in praise of seizing power, that "an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man." We must note that Emerson, in praising institutions as the establishments of individual men, cites Jesus, Luther, Wesley as such men. Within the climate of such thought as Emerson bequeaths us, however, we must note as well that a Stalin or a Hitler finds justification—as shocking as such additions may appear to Emerson's catalogue of "great men" straddled in the sun of history.

[1]There is a popular version of Emerson's break with his church in 1832: it was in consequence (as a leading college text puts it) of "an intense religious experience around . . . 1830 or 1832." He notifies his church that he can no longer administer the Lord's Supper if wine and bread are to be used, resigns his Boston pastorship, and undertakes a leisurely tour of Europe, returning to quiet retreat in Concord in 1834. That is the high version of the matter, but there is more. In those crucial years, he had also married Ellen Tucker, who died of tuberculosis in 1831, leaving him a comfortable estate. The story of his courtship of Ellen at least qualifies the idealistic version of Emerson's "intense religious experience." Gravely ill, her illness seemed exacerbated by her ardour for Emerson, who as fiancé was pressing her to make her will. That is "the ugly subject" she speaks of in her letters. (His letters to her do not survive.) After her death, her father's executor attempted to prevent Emerson's inheriting her part of the estate, but in the contest the court ruled in Emerson's favor in 1832, concomitant with his resignation from the Second Church of Boston. Thereafter he was assured the annual income. As Kenneth S. Lynn remarks (*Commentary*, March 1982), when Emerson encourages the would-be scholar to avoid the business world with its materialistic values, however straining upon one's survival, he does so from a comfortable assurance of an annual income, derived from that same business establishment. [2]Notice the following message in "The American Scholar," in which Emerson rejects as "mischievous" the traditional conception of existence as an effect of God's creation, abrogating God's continuous creation and substituting man in that necessary office: "It is a mischievous notion that we are come late into nature; that the world was finished a long time ago. As the world was plastic and fluid in the hands of God, so it is ever to so much of his attributes as we bring to it. . . . in proportion as a man has anything in him divine, the firmament flows before him, and takes his signet and form. . . . They are the kings of the world who give the color of their present thought to all nature and all art, and persuade men by the cheerful serenity of their carrying the matter, that this thing

which they do, is the apple which the ages have desired to pluck, now at last ripe, and inviting nations to the harvest. The great man makes the great thing." Having started with God's Eden, we come to man's, to the promise of ripened fruit for all "nations" to be provided by the few who discover the divine in themselves and on that authority remold the "plastic and fluid" world. [5]Mr. Morrow laments (*Time*, May 10, 1982) that we seem to have abandoned Emerson, who "preached the holiness of the conscious mind" with "a vision of personal possibility." Instead, "The trajectory of our thoughts tends to be downward. We are transfixed by Auschwitz and Hiroshima and Cambodia and Bangladesh." We should rather consider whether Emersonian arguments about the holiness of the conscious mind are not themselves contributions to that downward trend. The Morrow essay is aimed at the popular traffic in ideas which depends upon Emersonian emotion rather than precise thought and so is cast in Emersonian rhetoric: Emerson is "the orphic saint" who "gave America a metaphysics." He "sanctified America's ambitions," his works being "prayers for intelligence and character," through which prayers we celebrate him as the "rhapsodist of beginnings." Morrow admits problems with him, but "Emerson must be held blameless for the fact that his exultations on individual get-up-and-go have ended . . . by producing George Steinbrenner." On the other hand, Emerson is presumably to be credited for Coach Woody Hayes who says, as one of the speakers at Harvard's forum celebrating the 100th anniversary of Emerson's death, "he's on my starting eleven. . . . In fact, he's my No. 1." We might reflect on the mediation that brings a Woody Hayes and Emerson together at Harvard. The mediator, I suggest, is Harvard President Charles W. Eliot, as may be demonstrated by comparing some of Emerson's ideas and President Eliot's updating of those ideas through plain speaking in his own Divinity School address in 1909. President Eliot, in characterizing through Emersonian negations "The Religion of the Future," provides as prophets Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill, and such prophetic writings as the new Biblical criticism. Then he lists what the new religion will not be, and we quote several of the numbered points: "*1.* The religion of the future will not be based on authority, either spiritual or temporal. . . . *3.* There will be . . . no worship, express or implied, of dead ancestors, teachers, or rulers; . . . no identification of any human being, however majestic in character, with the Eternal Deity. . . . [Here follows an Emersonian argument against the Divinity of Christ.] *4.* . . . the primary object will not be the personal welfare or safety of the individual in this world or any other. *5.* The religion of the future will not be propitiatory, sacrificial, or expiatory. . . . It will be an immense advance if twentieth-century Christianity can be purified from all these survivals of barbarous, or semi-barbarous, religious conceptions; because they imply such an unworthy idea of God. *7.* The religion of the future will not be gloomy, ascetic, or maledictory. . . . The central thought of the new religion will therefore be a humane and worthy idea of God, thoroughly consistent with the nineteenth-century revelations concerning man and nature. . . ." Those "revelations" are provided, of course, by the new science. The problem of evil will be solved by "resistance and prevention," *i.e.*, the gnostic serums of distilled fact.